

Oct. 25, 2018
Mark 7:24-30
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
Mary E Baard

Fruit of the Spirit: Gentleness

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

Today's theme, in our fruit of the Spirit series, is gentleness. The word in biblical Greek is *praus*. It is often translated gentleness or meekness; yet it doesn't have the connotation that those words often have for us today. In the Greek it comes from a term that described training horses, eg. to gentle a horse. Thus, it doesn't mean gentleness as passive or mild; it means to bring strength under control, which takes learning, patience and humility.

With that in mind I've chosen what might have seemed an odd choice for the fruit of gentleness – the story of the Syrophenician woman who comes to ask Jesus for healing for her daughter. I've chosen this story for the way that Jesus is gentled in the story – for what he learns. This woman is not Jewish; she is a Gentile. At first, Jesus shockingly rebuffs her, although he uses a word for dog that referred to pet dogs, not wild dogs. She is not easily rebuffed. She persists. Let's listen in.

SERMON

Jesus was a Jew. Today we pray for and grieve with our Jewish neighbors in Pittsburgh after the vicious attack on a synagogue in their city. Ironically, Mr. Roger's lived in that neighborhood. May we keep his advice in mind to notice and give thanks for those who come to help, in the midst of the crisis.

Jesus was targeted with violence. Today we pray for and express concern for those who were targeted by pipe bombs this last week. We also pray for those who consider those targeted to be enemies. We pray for all those whose attitudes of hatred are being inflamed in the present political climate.

Jesus was a refugee. His family fled to Egypt seeking freedom and safety. Yesterday, at the Maine Conference meeting in Saco, two pastors from Honduras brought us greetings and thanks for our partnership with them – a partnership that was initiated by this congregation twenty years ago. We were reminded of the people we have seen on the news who are on an exodus from Honduras and other Latin American countries headed to our southern border seeking freedom and safety and food.

Will we be able to bring the strength of our selves, our churches, our politics, and our nation under control for the goodwill of ourselves and other people or will we keep to our tribe - whether it be religious tribe or political or national – and in so doing reject and demonize the other.

In today's story we see Jesus' temptation to put his tribe first. Most likely, it was what he was taught. It's a spiritual challenge for all of us.

Jesus wasn't born spiritually mature. His spiritual strength had to be gentled under God's influence. How did that happen? His family and his community helped him along the way. He prayed and he prayed and he prayed. He lived deeply into his own tradition but didn't stay stuck in. He listened deeply – not only to God, but also to other people.

Sometimes, it was people, like the Syrophenician woman, from outside his own tradition that broadened his sense of call. Through her Jesus heard God's call to love the whole world. God continually gentled Jesus to bring his incredible spiritual strength under control, because God so loves the world – the whole world.

It is that work of gentling that we are called to with one another. To persist in encouraging and challenging one another as we seek to be followers of Jesus. Being a Christian is not a destination; it is a journey. Maya Angelou once remarked *I'm working at trying to be a Christian and that's serious business... The truth is, all day long you try to do it, try to be it. And then in the evening, if you are honest and have a little courage, you look at yourself and say, 'Hmmm. I only blew it 86 times. Not bad.' I'm trying to be a Christian.*

She went on to say *I'm always amazed... when (people) walk up to me and say, 'I'm a Christian.' I always think, 'Already? You've already got it? My goodness, you're fast.*

(Christian Century, 10/24/18, pg. 3)

My Maya Angelou's math, over the past eight years, we've all blown it only 250,000 times. Over these same eight years we are grateful to have shared this journey with Geoff.

Geoff, we thank you for your steadfastness in the ways you have encouraged and challenged us to be gentle in the way of Christ.

Recently Geoff reminded me that at the end of our first worship service together, I turned to him and said, *That was easy.* Being Christian isn't easy but working with Geoff has been. Geoff has a graciousness of spirit and a flexibility in the moment so that the whole worship experience is able to be more than the sum of the parts.

Geoff, we thank you for the ways you have been our eyes and ears in the wider community and the wider church, helping us to look beyond ourselves and know where we can be of service.

We are grateful for the ways you have brought us into the 21st century forms of communication. We, as a staff, - and especially me - are grateful for your gentle guidance – for some of us over and over again – to learn how to use the technology at our fingertips.

Thank you for the confirmation classes, the Easter vigils, the New Year's Eve Vigils, the prayers, the humor, and simply – yet profoundly - the gift of your presence.

With love, we send you to the Foreside Community Church and wish you well together on your journey to becoming Christians.

Our prayers and our blessings go with you and Julia.